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ABSTRACT

A 1994 Department of Education national evaluation of federally-supported adult education programs looked at programs' effectiveness in improving literacy skills, English language proficiency, and secondary school completion. National policy on adult literacy education is articulated in the Adult Education Act (AEA) and National Literacy Act, which amended the AEA in 1990. These provide for adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. Current ESL adult learners are primarily Hispanic and Asian, living in urban areas and the west, foreign-born, literate in their first language, and of limited oral English proficiency. About two-thirds of adult education programs provide ESL instruction, commonly offered through public schools. ESL program components often have larger enrollments and larger classes than ABE or ASE, and participants acquire three to four times as much instruction. Self-reports of ESL clients and standardized test scores indicate that instruction improves basic English skills and enhances employability, and ESL clients show interest in continuing their education. While the ESL target population is much smaller than the ASE target population, ESL services are in greatest demand, and demand exceeds current capacity. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

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ESL Instruction in Adult Education: Findings from a National Evaluation

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In 1994, the U.S. Department of Education completed a national evaluation of federally-supported adult education programs. The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of current programs in reducing deficits in literacy skills, English language proficiency, and secondary school completion. The evaluation was carried out by Development Associates between 1990 and 1994 as the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP), using data from program year April 1991 to April 1992. The study's findings were published in a series of four reports describing the adult education service delivery system, the characteristics of adult education clients, the patterns and predictors of program attendance, and estimates of program impacts and costs. This digest summarizes findings of the NEAEP that are pertinent to English as a second language (ESL) literacy education, including a profile of the ESL population served by adult education, the nature of ESL program participation, the impact of ESL instruction, and estimates of both current and future demand for ESL services. The separate NEAEP reports are listed at the end of this digest.

The Adult Education Act

National policy on adult literacy education is articulated in the Adult Education Act (AEA) and in the National Literacy Act, which amended the AEA in 1990. The intent of the act is to help out-of-school adults (a) acquire the literacy and—in the case of ESL adults—the language skills needed to function effectively in society, (b) benefit from job training and retraining in order to obtain and retain employment, and (c) continue their education to at least the level of high school completion.

The AEA provides a public funding vehicle to support adult literacy efforts for adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and ESL instruction through federal grants to state education agencies. Funds are targeted to persons 16 and older who do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent and who are not currently enrolled in school, or who *have* a diploma but lack English *language* (speaking, listening, reading, or writing) skills. The target population for ABE programs is native speakers who read at less than an eighth grade level; for ASE programs it is those who read above the eighth grade level. The target population for ESL programs is learners who speak a language other than English as their first language and who need to improve English *oral/aural skills* (listening and speaking), as well as literacy skills (reading and writing proficiency).

A Profile of ESL Clients in Adult Education

The current adult ESL learner population is primarily Hispanic (69%) and Asian (19%), with the vast majority (85%) living in major metropolitan areas and residing primarily (72%) in the western region of the United States. Adult education clients in ESL programs are overwhelmingly (98%) foreign born, with most (72%) speaking Spanish in the home. While almost all ESL clients (92%) reported that they read well or very well in their native language, few (13%) reported that they could speak English well at the time of enrollment, and most (73%) were initially placed at the beginning level of ESL instruction. Thirty-six percent of the ESL clients were employed at the time of enrollment in adult education, and 11% had been public assistance recipients during the preceding year. ESL clients were generally more educated than their ABE/ASE counterparts upon program entry, judging from prior school attainment. For example, half of the ESL clients had completed at least high school compared to only 17% of the ABE/ASE group.

The Nature of ESL Program Participation

Approximately two of every three adult education programs provide ESL services although ESL is the prominent component in only 21% of the programs. Most of these programs offer ESL through the public school systems. ESL components of adult education programs tend to have larger enrollments than ABE and ASE and they tend to have larger classes: The median class size for ESL is 20; it is 12 for ABE and 15 for ASE. Furthermore, NEAEP results indicate that ESL participants acquire three to four times more instruction than ABE and ASE students (a median of 113 hours of instruction compared to 35 and 28 hours respectively) before leaving programs.

Certain program factors are strongly related to high levels of ESL attendance (persistence):

- Learners who use support services provided by their programs (such as counseling, transportation, and childcare) persist longer than those who do not use these services;
- Learners who attend day classes only tend to persist longer than those who study at night; and
- Learners who participate in computer-assisted learning labs or whose instruction includes independent study persist longer than those whose instruction is only classroom-based.

The Impact of ESL Instruction

The AEA is intended to help adults by improving their basic education skills, enhancing their employability, and encouraging continued education.

In self-reports solicited six months after program exit, ESL clients indicated that participation in adult education had helped a majority (60%) of them to improve their basic English skills. Standardized achievement test results—an average gain of 5 scale score points on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) reading test after 120 hours of instruction—also provided objective evidence that ESL instruction had helped to improve the reading skills of adults learning English as a second language. At program entry, the English language ability of most ESL learners was only suitable for entry-level employment; at

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program exit, their English literacy skills had developed to a degree that was sufficient for participating in job training or for holding a job requiring the comprehension of simple English text information. The ESL program factors that contributed directly to these English literacy gains included cost per seat hour and total hours of instruction. That is, basic English literacy skills improved with increasing amounts of ESL instruction and with increasing financial investment in ESL programs.

The six-month follow-up results also indicate that 35% of the ESL clients benefitted in some way from adult education in terms of enhanced employability. For example, the 6% net increase in employment six months after program exit was primarily related to ESL participation. In addition, among those who remained employed from intake through the six-month follow-up, ESL clients benefitted more from program participation than did ABE/ASE clients in terms of improving their job performance and in obtaining a better job than the one they held prior to enrolling in adult education.

Finally, ESL clients showed interest in continuing their education. Almost a quarter (24%) of the ESL clients who lacked a high school diploma had resumed their education within six months of leaving adult education, most of them having reenrolled in English language instruction courses.

Demand for ESL Services

While the ESL target population is much smaller than the ASE target population, there is considerable evidence, especially in states that have high concentrations of immigrants (ie. California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and New York) that ESL services are in the greatest demand among those seeking adult education. For example, ESL learners constituted the majority (51%) of adult education clients receiving instructional services during the 1992 program year; this represents a 268% increase over the 12 years since the last national study of adult education in 1980. In addition, ESL students received a majority (76%) of the hours of instruction. Examining the participation rate per thousand shows that targeted adults are three to four times more likely to participate in adult education if they are members of the ESL target population than if they belong to either the ABE or ASE groups respectively. Another indicator of demand consists of the number of clients on waiting lists maintained by adult education programs. These data reveal that, in general, there are more ESL students waiting to be served than can be accommodated by existing program capacity and that the average ESL waiting list is considerably longer than those of ABE and ASE programs. In short, ESL clients have the highest rates of participation in adult education, and the demand for ESL instruction tends to exceed the capacity of the adult education service delivery system.

Conclusion

The ESL population has grown tremendously in the United States over the last 15 years, and is projected to increase at a rate faster than that estimated for either the ABE or ASE populations. ESL students are highly motivated to participate in adult education, they participate in adult literacy instruction much longer than their ABE and ASE counterparts, and they experience considerable benefits from adult education in terms of improved basic English literacy skills and enhanced employability. Unfortunately, the current adult education system is unable to keep up with the high demand for ESL services in spite of the important results being achieved by ESL literacy education. Given the importance of ESL and the diversity of the ESL clients' educational and cultural backgrounds, research studies are needed on topics such as instructional approaches and assessment strategies that are successful with adult ESL learners at every level.

The National Evaluation of Adult Education Reports

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